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ABSTRACT

Two features limit the value of legislatively mandated high-stakes tests such as Alaska's Benchmark and High School Graduation Qualifying Exam as accountability tools in the current standards-driven environment. First, the sheer numbers of tests administered have led to a reliance on multiple choice and short-answer questions, with only minimal use of more useful, performance-based approaches to assessment. This has left the harder-to-measure aspects of the standards in the background. Teachers are left to choose between teaching the full range of learning outcomes, or teaching to the test. The second problem is that when high-stakes tests are used to determine things such as grade-level promotion, eligibility for graduation, teacher reward/punishment, and school ranking, test-makers design the tests around legal defensibility rather than educational considerations. When there are significant group variations in test performance, as in cross-cultural situations found in rural Alaska, it is important not to fall into the trap of blaming the victim and respond by intensifying the current curriculum, extending schooling, or sending students to boarding schools. The Alaska Rural Systemic Initiative (AKRSI) has demonstrated that an education system with a strong foundation in the local culture produces positive effects in all indicators of school success, including test scores. AKRSI has developed cultural standards to assist schools that regard cultural considerations as an important part of the design of their educational programs. (TD)

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Alaska Federation of Natives ◇ University of Alaska ◇ National Science Foundation ◇ Annenberg Rural Challenge

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by Ray Barnhardt, Angayuqaq Oscar Kawagley and Frank Hill,
Alaska Rural Systemic Initiative

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Alaska Native Knowledge Network

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Cultural Standards and Test Scores

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With the release of the first Benchmark and High School Graduation Qualifying Exam scores this fall, educators throughout Alaska have been convening to address the many issues that are raised by these new checkpoints on the educational landscape.

Debates are already underway on ways to interpret the results and develop appropriate responses, given the predictable differences in performance among various students and schools. At the heart of these debates are concerns over the use (or misuse) of the test results to make critical judgements about students, teachers and schools in ways that attempt to reduce complex school performance issues down to a few simplistic variables.

We need look no further than the latest editions of *Education Week*, *Phi Delta Kappan* or *Educational Researcher* to see that these debates are occurring on a national scale and that Alaska is not alone in venturing out

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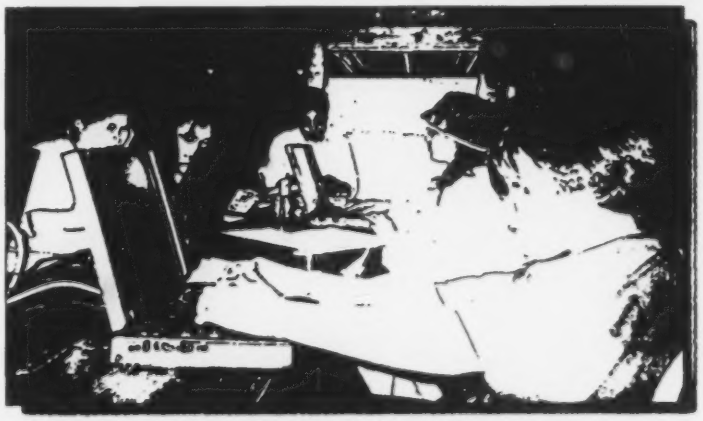

Harriet Nungasak, Alicia Kanayurak, George Olanna (instructor), Kimberly Rychnovsky and Donald Tritt work on their science projects at the ANSES Science-Culture Camp held at Gaaleeya Spirit Camp July 11–25, 2000. Skills gained at science and cultural camps are brought into the classroom and utilized throughout the school year. See "AISES Corner", page 6.

RC 022 639

Contents

Cultural Standards and Test Scores .. 1
Alaska Rural Systemic Initiative Moves Into Phase II 5
AISES Corner 6
Fall Course Offerings for Educators in Rural Alaska 7
Aspects of Traditional Iñupiat Education 8
Village Science: The Pike Story 13
Yup'ik Region 14
Aleut/Alutiiq Region 15
Camp Qungaayuk 2000 15
Southeast Region 16

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into uncharted waters in the name of school accountability. Hopefully we can learn from other peoples mistakes, and by doing a few things right, maybe others can learn from our successes. However, this will require taking a long-term perspective on the many issues involved and not expecting to find a silver bullet that will produce instant solutions to long-standing complex problems.

First of all, we must recognize the practical limits of the tests themselves. As diagnostic tools coupled with other related indicators of ability and performance, tests that are properly designed, flexibly administered and judiciously interpreted can provide valuable information to guide educational decision-making. However, there are two features of these legislatively mandated high-stakes tests that inhibit their educational value and thus make it necessary to exercise considerable caution in their use as accountability tools in the current standards-driven environment.

Since the tests are mandated for all students at four grade levels, the sheer number and frequency of the testing introduces a major time and cost factor. As a result, the design of the tests tends to rely on approaches that are simpler and cheaper to administer and score (i.e., multiple choice and short-answer questions) with only minimal use of the more costly, but flexible, culturally adaptable and educationally useful performance-based approaches to assessment. Unfortunately, this emphasis on ease of administration has also narrowed the selection of which content standards count and which ones don't, leaving the harder-to-measure aspects of the standards in the background.

As a result, teachers (and districts) are caught in the dilemma of aligning their teaching and curriculum with the full range of learning outcomes outlined in the standards or narrowing their lessons down to that which is measured on the tests (see *Education Week*, July 7, 2000, p.1 at www.edweek.org for a more detailed discussion of this issue). In this regard, the current testing system can be seen as working against the implementation of the standards-based school reform efforts with which it was originally associated. A true standards-based educational system requires a much broader approach to assessment than current resources allow.

The second feature that reduces the educational value of high-stakes testing is its intended use in making critical decisions that can adversely impact people's lives and careers (e.g., grade-level promotion, eligibility for graduation, teacher reward/punishment and school rating/ranking.) When used for such purposes, the tests themselves tend to revert to those measures that the test-makers (in Alaska's case, CBT/McGraw-Hill) can defend in court when challenged by those affected. Consequently, we see a heavy emphasis on standardization (in both content and administration), whereby many important aspects of the content standards that require local adaptation or are not easily measured are set aside in favor of those items and testing practices that meet the test of "legal defensibility." So we should not be surprised when we run into problems with a testing system that has been constructed around legal and political, rather than educational considerations.

What are the Options?

For better or worse, the Alaska Benchmark and High School Graduation Qualifying Exams are a reality and it is our professional responsibility to do what we can to minimize their negative effects and to maximize

their potential benefits. Most critical in that regard is the need to examine the issues that emerge in the broadest context available to us and not to use the results to promote simplistic, short-term solutions to long-term, complex problems. Nor should we fall into the trap of "blaming the victim" (i.e., the student) when there are significant group variations in academic performance. This is especially true in a cross-cultural setting such as rural Alaska, where we have a long history of repetitious unsuccessful educational experimentation on students while ignoring the well-documented source of many of the problems—that is the persistent cultural gulf between teachers and students, school and community.

Based on the experiences in other states and the rife speculation underway here in Alaska, we can expect several things to happen over the next few months. The initial responses to the release of the test results are likely to point to two factors to explain differential performance between students and schools—low teacher expectations and lack of opportunity to learn—each of which will lead to predictable forms of remediation.

Under the banner of "all students can learn to high standards," teachers will be admonished to teach harder and more of whatever it is that students are determined by the tests as lacking. While this may seem logical on the surface, it ignores the possibility that the real issue may not be low expectations at all (though certainly that does exist) and that "more of the same" may exacerbate the problem by producing higher dropout rates rather than addressing the more fundamental issue of lack-of-fit between what we teach, how we teach it and the context in which it is taught. Intensifying the current curriculum and extending schooling into the weekend or summer also ignores the inherent limitations to school improvement in rural Alaska that result from having to import teachers and administrators from outside for whom the village setting is a foreign and inevitably temporary home.

The second issue of making sure students have had the opportunity to learn the subject matter on which they are being tested is more readily identifiable as a problem, but no less complicated (and expensive) in producing a solution. If a small rural school is not offering the level of mathematics instruction that students need to pass the exam, the solution is not to send the students elsewhere for schooling. To assume that a boarding school (as some legislators are suggesting) can make up for the limitations of a village high school ignores the fact that a well-rounded education consists of much more than just the subject matter that is taught in school. It also ignores the negative impact that taking students out of their home has on the family, the community and the student's own future role as a parent and contributing member of society. There is nothing taught in a boarding school that can't be taught cheaper and more effectively in a village school linked together with other village schools in a web of rich and extensive learning opportunities. Furthermore, there are many important things that are learned at home in a village setting that cannot be taught in a boarding school. Boarding schools may be justified as an optional alternative program for selected students, but not as a substitute for village schools.

When providing "opportunities to learn," we need to consider all aspects of a child's upbringing and prepare them in such a way that they can "become responsible, capable and whole human beings in the process" (see *Alaska Standards for Culturally Responsive Schools*). When we do so, the issues associated with benchmark and qualifying exams will take care of themselves. How then do we go about this with some degree of confidence that we will achieve the outcome we seek—graduates capable of functioning as responsible adults, including passing state exams?

The *Alaska Standards for Culturally-Responsive Schools* is available from:

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P.O. Box 756730
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It can also be found on the ANKN website:

http://www.ankn.uaf.edu.

Impact of Cultural Standards on Standardized Test Scores

For the past five years, the Alaska Rural Systemic Initiative has been working intensively with 20 of the 48 rural school districts in the state to implement a series of initiatives that are intended to "systematically document the indigenous knowledge systems of Alaska Native people and develop educational policies and practices that effectively integrate indigenous and western knowledge through a renewed educational system." The assumption behind the AKRSI reform strategy is that if we coordinate our efforts and resources across all aspects of the education system and address the issues in a

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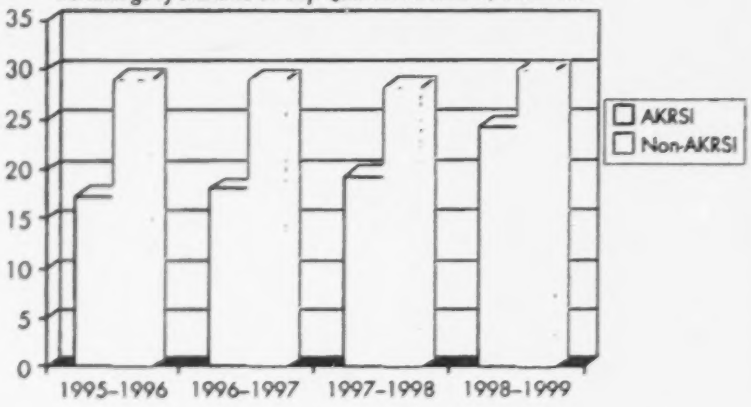
focused, statewide manner, perhaps better headway will be realized. Two outcomes of this work are worthy of consideration as schools review the results of the state tests and ponder their next steps.

First of all, building an education system with a strong foundation in the local culture appears to produce positive effects in all indicators of school success, including dropout rates, college attendance, parent involvement, grade-point averages and standardized achievement test scores. With regard to student achievement, using the eighth-grade CAT-5 math test scores as an impact indicator for the first four years of implementation of the AKRSI school reform initiatives in the 20 participating school districts (which have historically had the lowest student achievement levels in the state), there has been a differential gain of 5.9% points in the number of students who are performing in the top quartile for AKRSI partner schools over non-AKRSI rural schools. AKRSI schools gained 6.9% points in the upper quartile compared to a 1.0% point gain for non-AKRSI schools, with a corresponding decrease in the lower quartile. With AKRSI districts now producing 24.3% of their students testing in the upper quartile, they are only 0.7% point below the national average. In other words, through strong place-based education initiatives, the AKRSI schools are closing the achievement gap with the non-AKRSI schools. The following graph illustrates the gains on a year-by-year basis:

Eighth Grade Mathematics Performance

Percentage of Students on Top Quartile on CAT-5, 1996–1999



In reviewing this data (drawn from the state summary of the school district report cards), it is clear that something has been going on in the 20 AKRSI school districts that is producing a slow but steady gain in the standardized test scores (along with all the other indicators we have been tracking.) So just what is it that is producing these results? Since the gains are widespread across all cultural regions and the scores show consistent improvement over each of the four years, they clearly are not a function of one particular curricular or pedagogical initiative, nor are they limited to AKRSI-sponsored activities. The best summary of what it is that has produced these results can be found in the *Alaska Standards for Culturally Responsive Schools.*

These "cultural standards" were compiled by educators from throughout the state as an outgrowth of the work that was initiated through the Alaska Rural Systemic Initiative and implemented in varying degrees by the participating schools. As such, when coupled with the impact data summarized here, they provide some concrete guidelines for schools and communities to consider as they construct school improvement plans aimed at producing more effective educational programs for the students in their care. We now have strong evidence that when we make a diligent and persistent effort to forge a strong cultural fit between what we teach, how we teach and the context in which we teach, we can produce successful, well-rounded graduates who are also capable of producing satisfactory test scores.

The AKRSI staff are currently working with the Alaska Department of Education and Early Development to provide assistance to schools for whom cultural considerations play an important part in the design of their educational programs. Alaska Native educators, including Elders, are an important resource that all schools need to draw upon to make sure that our responses to the results of the Alaska Benchmark and High School Graduation Qualifying Exams go beyond Band-Aid solutions and lead to long-term improvement of our education systems. The future of our state depends on it. Curricular resources and technical assistance for such efforts are available through the regional Native Educator Associations, as well as the Alaska Native Knowledge Network web site at www.ankn.uaf.edu.